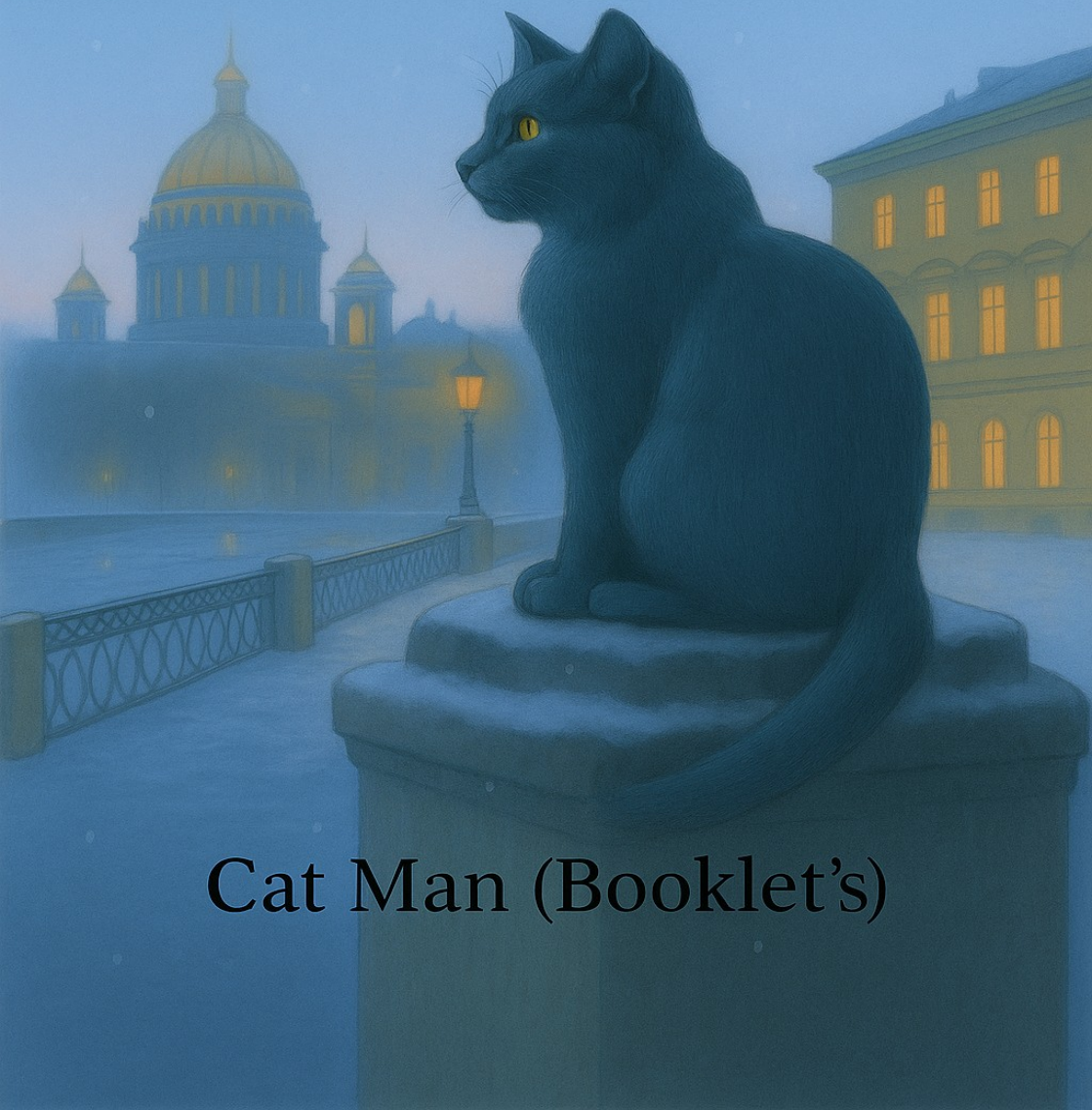
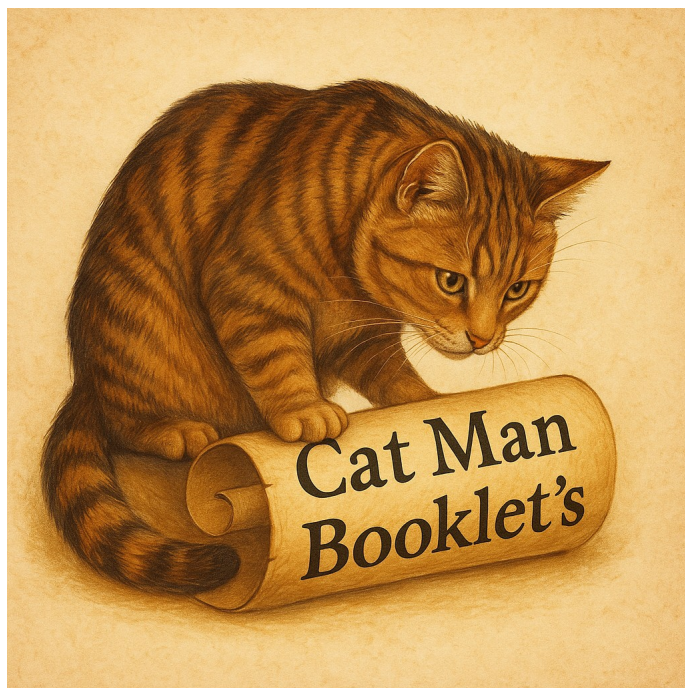


A History of Domestic Cats in Russia



Cat Man (Booklet's)

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Origins and Early Presence

The domestic cat, a familiar member of households around the world, has a long and fascinating history deeply rooted in human civilization. Its origins can be traced to the Fertile Crescent around 9,000 to 10,000 years ago, with the modern domestic cat (*Felis catus*) being closely related genetically to the African wildcat (*Felis silvestris lybica*). From these beginnings, cats spread across the globe, forming diverse relationships with human societies.

In Russia as well, the history of the domestic cat is rich and multifaceted, reflecting the unique cultural and historical development of the region. This report aims to explore the history of domestic cats in Russia — from the earliest archaeological evidence to their present-day status — highlighting their role across various historical periods, their significance in folklore and culture, and the notable stories associated with them, without relying on breed lists or tables.

The arrival of domestic cats in Europe occurred during the Neolithic period, but their presence in the territory of modern Russia can be dated more precisely through archaeological and historical data. Scholars suggest that three major waves of domestic cat spread reached Europe, each corresponding with increased trade activity. The second wave is linked to Roman influence in the early centuries CE, while the third is associated with the Vikings, who brought cats home from their far-reaching voyages beginning in the 7th century CE.

Early Archaeological Finds in Kievan Rus'

The earliest archaeological evidence of domestic cats in the territory of present-day Russia comes from the period of Kievan Rus'. One of the earliest known finds is the skeleton of a domestic cat discovered in a 10th-century grave at an early medieval cemetery in Shestovytsia — a site associated with Scandinavian settlers, revealing their far-reaching networks and contacts.

Remains of domestic cats have also been found in 10th-century complexes in Kyiv, the capital of the Rus', a major trading center whose economy was also built on commerce. These early discoveries suggest that the arrival of domestic cats in the region was closely connected to expanding trade networks, particularly those linking Scandinavians with the Byzantine world. This highlights the integration of early Rus' society into broader European cultural and commercial movements.

By the 12th century, domestic cats had become noticeably more common in Russia, as shown by zooarchaeological evidence from sites such as Vyshhorod, Zvenyhorod, Novgorod, and Old Ryazan. Modern research challenges the older assumption that cat bones were found primarily in urban centers. Evidence now shows that domestic cats were also present in rural settlements in the Kyiv district and in the Poltava region.

The presence of cats in both urban hubs and rural settlements during this early period suggests a wider integration into different spheres of life — not only as luxury goods or urban pest controllers, but as animals with roles in multiple types of communities. This may reflect varying functions and social meanings for cats across different settlements.



Role and Value in Ancient and Medieval Russia

In ancient and medieval Russia, cats played one primary role: pest control. They were commonly kept near homes to hunt and eat rodents, protecting food stores from spoilage and contamination and contributing to overall household hygiene.

The spread of domestic cats in Europe, including in the lands of the Rus', coincided with the expansion of the black rat. This overlap highlights the importance of cats in combating these widespread pests and the diseases associated with them.

The legal and economic status of cats during this period reflected their significance. Article 76 of an extended version of the *Russkaya Pravda* (11th–13th centuries) imposed a substantial fine of three grivnas for stealing a cat — a clear indication of their recognized value within society and the legal protection afforded to them.

Remarkably, in medieval Russia the monetary value of a cat was equal to that of an ox, underscoring its high status and perceived rarity in earlier periods. This value likely stemmed from their effectiveness in pest control and their relative scarcity.

Cats were also allowed in monasteries and churches as “clean animals,” where they protected food supplies from mice and rats — a unique level of acceptance within religious institutions. Their presence reflected not only practical necessity but also a degree of respect for their role.

It is noteworthy that domestic cats in medieval Rus' reached considerable size, likely due to stable and higher-

quality food sources provided by humans, suggesting a form of commensalism and care. While pest control was their primary purpose, their presence in households likely fostered moments of companionship, even if this was not their main function at the time.



Cats in Russian Folklore and Mythology

Russian folklore and mythology offer deep insight into the many layers of meaning associated with cats. Early Slavs believed that cats were powerful allies in the fight against evil spirits and often linked them to Veles — the deity of the underworld, the lowlands, and livestock. This association highlights the cat's perceived mystical significance and its independent nature.

Folklore holds that, despite their independence, cats protected the home and showed affection toward small children, suggesting a nuanced view of their relationship with humans. Severe penalties for killing a cat in Slavic societies — including the belief that doing so would bring seven years of misfortune — reflect their revered status and possible spiritual connection.

Russian fairy tales feature a wide range of cat characters. The mythical giant cat **Kot Bayun**, known for his enchanting voice, could heal or lull listeners into a deadly sleep. He often inhabits remote, magical realms and embodies a dual nature of danger and potential benefit.

The iconic **Learned Cat (Kot Uchenyi)** from Alexander Pushkin's poem *Ruslan and Lyudmila* is a symbol of wisdom and storytelling. He endlessly circles a magical oak tree while reciting tales, emphasizing the importance of narrative tradition and the connection to a mythic past.

Other stories, such as “**The Cat and the Fox**,” highlight the cat's cleverness and ability to outwit other animals, reinforcing its reputation as an intelligent and crafty creature.

However, not all depictions are positive. The **Ovinnik**, a demonic barn spirit often portrayed in feline form, is

associated with threshing houses and the threat of fire — illustrating how cats could also be linked to darker forces in folklore.

Gender dynamics also appear in these traditions. Male cats (*koty*) are often portrayed positively, while female cats (*koshki*) tend to carry negative connotations — linked to misfortune, perceived selfish independence, or even promiscuity. These portrayals may reflect broader social attitudes embedded within the stories.

Russia also has a rich collection of proverbs involving cats, each offering insight into feline behavior and using it as a metaphor for human nature. Examples include:

- “Not every day is Maslenitsa for the cat.” (Good times don’t last forever.)
- “They live like cat and dog.” (Constant arguing.)
- “Don’t buy a cat in a sack.” (Don’t buy something without seeing it.)
- “When the cat’s away, the mice will dance.” (People misbehave without supervision.)
- “At night all cats are gray.” (Hard to distinguish things when information is unclear.)
- “A kind word is pleasant even to a cat.” (Kindness is universally appreciated.)
- “A cat knows whose meat it has eaten.” (Guilt betrays itself.)
- “A cat has nine lives.” (Resilience.)
- “Cats scratch at the soul.” (Emotional unease.)
- “A black cat walked between them.” (A rift has formed.)

- “Don’t pull the cat by the tail.” (Don’t delay.)
- “A cat who walks alone.” (Independence.)

These sayings reveal how deeply cats are woven into Russian views of human behavior, personality, and fate.



Cats in the Tsarist Era **(16th to Early 20th Century)**

During the Tsarist era, from the 16th to the early 20th century, the perception and role of cats in Russia underwent notable development, reflecting their presence across different social classes.

The high value of cats persisted into the early Tsarist period. The popular legend of the Byzantine princess Anna bringing a cat to Russia in the 9th century — though predating the Tsarist era — established a symbolic precedent. Legal protections and longstanding recognition of the cat's value highlight its continued importance, most likely tied to pest control and its perceived rarity or exotic nature.

In the 18th century, Peter the Great issued a practical decree instructing citizens to keep cats in their barns to combat rodent infestations — a clear sign of state recognition of their usefulness in protecting food supplies.

A decisive moment came during the reign of Empress Elizabeth in the mid-18th century. After learning that the city of Kazan was free of mice thanks to a particular breed of skilled mousers, she ordered thirty of these cats to be brought to St. Petersburg to address the rodent problem in the unfinished Winter Palace.

This event established a lasting tradition of cats within the imperial residence and emphasized the special value of Kazan cats. Remarkably, these cats were even listed as part of the sovereign's personal guard and received a small allowance — evidence of their official status and importance to the crown.

Catherine the Great in the late 18th century had a complex relationship with cats. Despite her personal dislike of them, she tolerated certain breeds, particularly Russian Blues and white Angora cats, recognizing their role as “guardians of the art galleries,” protecting collections from damage caused by rodents. Successive tsars continued the tradition of keeping cats in the royal palaces, solidifying their role as established members of the imperial household and further elevating their symbolic significance.

Members of the Russian aristocracy also kept cats as companions. Surviving photographs from the 19th and early 20th centuries show figures such as Grand Duchess Maria Nikolaevna with a kitten, and Tsarevich Alexei with his Siamese cat Kotka. Grand Duchess Olga’s cat Vaska is another example, demonstrating that cats were valued even within elite households.

In contrast, life for cats in modest or rural homes, including those of peasants, was more practical. Although detailed documentation from this period is limited, surviving 19th-century images of peasant girls with cats indicate that cats were kept as household animals outside aristocratic circles as well — likely for companionship as well as continued pest control.

Cats also appear in Russian folk art, such as Fedoskino lacquer boxes, where depictions of peasant girls holding cats suggest their everyday presence in rural life.

Cats in the Soviet Era (1917–1991)

During the Soviet era, the situation of domestic cats in Russia changed significantly as social and political upheavals reshaped daily life. In the early post-revolution years, the new regime viewed pets with suspicion, considering them remnants of bourgeois culture and potential threats to ideological purity. This distrust, however, was directed more toward dogs than cats.

Cats retained their practical value as protectors against rodents, especially in increasingly urbanized environments and in communal apartments (*kommunalki*), where safeguarding limited food supplies was essential. Their usefulness became most evident during one of the darkest episodes in Soviet history: the Siege of Leningrad in World War II.

After the city's cat population was nearly wiped out by starvation, a devastating rat infestation threatened food stores and public health. In response, massive organized efforts began in 1943 to bring thousands of cats from other parts of the Soviet Union into Leningrad. Their contribution became symbolic of resilience and survival. During the famine, many desperate residents resorted to eating cats, leading to an almost total absence of felines in the city. Once the blockade was lifted, a major initiative transported approximately 5,000 cats back into Leningrad to fight the rat population.

Today, monuments such as **Elysey** and **Vasilisa** in St. Petersburg commemorate these “hero cats” of the siege.

In the later Soviet period, attitudes toward pets gradually softened. Cats grew increasingly recognized as companions and sources of emotional comfort, especially after Stalin's death, when private life became less tightly controlled.





Anecdotes of Soviet leaders — for instance, photographs of Lenin with cats — were later used in propaganda to portray a more relatable and human image of the revolutionary figure.

Cats became woven into Soviet art and photography, reflecting their integration into everyday life and cultural expression. The profound impact of the Siege of Leningrad solidified cats as heroic figures in the collective memory of the city and beyond. Their essential role in helping the city survive gave them a lasting place of honor.

Although early Soviet ideology was skeptical of household pets, cats managed to maintain — and even expand — their presence. Their practical role in rodent control, combined with a somewhat lower ideological scrutiny compared to dogs, allowed them to remain part of daily life. All of this suggests a quiet but persistent affection for cats among the Soviet population, even during times of strict social oversight.

Domestic Cats in Modern Russia

In modern Russia, domestic cats play an everyday and widespread role, remaining deeply significant in post-Soviet culture. Russia has one of the highest rates of cat ownership in the world, with cats being the country's most popular pets. Estimates suggest that Russian households include around 49–50 million cats and 25–26 million dogs. In recent decades, purebred cats have grown increasingly popular compared to mixed-breed cats.

Several cultural factors contribute to the continued popularity of cats in Russia. These include longstanding traditions and superstitions, such as the belief that a cat should be the first to enter a new home to bring good luck. Practical reasons also play a role: cats adapt well to apartment living in urban areas and generally require less care than dogs. Some people even feel that the independent but affectionate temperament of cats aligns with aspects of the Russian character.

St. Petersburg's vibrant cat culture has strengthened the city's reputation as Russia's unofficial "cat capital." The **Republic of Cats**, a well-known cat café-museum, houses many adoptable cats, including some former Hermitage cats. Numerous cat-themed monuments and statues — such as **Elysey and Vasilisa**, the **Learned Cat**, and **Tishka Matroskin** — are scattered throughout the city, becoming beloved landmarks and symbols. Every June, the **World Day of St. Petersburg Cats** is celebrated, underscoring the city's deep affection for its feline residents.

Russian cat breeds such as the elegant **Russian Blue**, the large and robust **Siberian**, and the unique hairless breeds **Donskoy** and **Peterbald** enjoy strong popularity

and cultural significance, both within Russia and internationally.

The ongoing challenges of managing stray cat populations and the efforts of animal shelters and rescue groups are also important aspects of modern cat life in Russia. Another noteworthy trend is the rise of “**cat activism**”, in which public petitions and social media campaigns concerning cat welfare often attract substantial attention — sometimes even more than unrelated political matters. This indicates a strong level of social empathy toward cats.

Russia’s exceptionally high rate of cat ownership highlights a deep cultural affinity for these animals, shaped by historical factors, practical needs, and longstanding traditions. St. Petersburg’s rich cat culture — expressed through landmarks, cafés, and annual celebrations — stands as a testament to the enduring legacy of cats in Russian history and their continued symbolic presence in everyday life.

Public reactions and activism related to cat welfare, including widespread outrage over cases of cruelty, demonstrate a growing awareness of animal rights and show how emotionally connected many Russians remain to their feline companions.



Notable Historical Events and Anecdotes

There are many remarkable historical events, anecdotes, and stories associated with cats in Russia — each illustrating the unique relationship between cats and the Russian people throughout the centuries.

One early legendary account tells of a Byzantine princess named Anna who brought a cat to Russia, marking an initial point of contact and a possible introduction of domesticated cats into the region.

A particularly fascinating historical episode occurred in 1745, when Empress Elizabeth ordered thirty highly skilled mousers from Kazan to be brought to St. Petersburg to combat a rodent problem in the Winter Palace. These exceptional cats successfully fulfilled their mission and are considered the forebears of today's Hermitage cats.

Equally powerful are the stories of cats during the Siege of Leningrad. Accounts include individual tales of survival and the collective effort to restore the cat population after the war. One moving story tells of **Waska**, a cat who helped her family survive by hunting rodents. The broader role of cats in eliminating the post-siege rat infestation remains one of the most compelling examples of their importance. Today's monuments honoring the "rescue cats" highlight this legacy.

Modern anecdotes show that cats continue to play prominent roles in Russian society. The viral story of **Viktor**, the overweight cat who was secretly swapped with a slimmer cat so he could fly on a plane, demonstrates the lengths to which some Russians will go for their feline companions.

Another famous example is **Achilles**, the deaf white cat

from the Hermitage who became a football oracle, predicting outcomes of FIFA Confederations Cup and World Cup matches. His fame shows how contemporary Russian pop culture embraces cats in playful and unexpected ways.

Other modern celebrity cats, known through social media for their unique appearances or adventures, further reflect the lasting fascination with felines in Russia.

Even the subtle linguistic note that the surname of the **Romanov** dynasty is etymologically connected to the Russian word for “cat” (*koshka*) adds an intriguing layer of historical association.

These events and stories illustrate the deep and often extraordinary bond between cats and the Russian people. From imperial decrees to wartime survival and viral modern fame, these narratives highlight the enduring significance of cats in Russian history and culture — a significance that often goes far beyond their practical roles.

The long-standing tradition of the Hermitage cats, which has survived for centuries and endured massive historical upheavals, serves as a powerful symbol of the lasting relationship between Russia and its cats, representing both practical need and cultural heritage.

Conclusion

In summary, the history of domestic cats in Russia is a long and meaningful journey. From their early arrival, closely tied to trade routes and the need for pest control, cats gradually became valued companions and important cultural figures. Their presence in folklore, fairy tales, and proverbs reflects a complex relationship ranging from respect and affection to superstition and fear.

During the Tsarist era, cats held a special status within the royal courts, while in the homes of ordinary people — including peasants — they continued to play a practical role as protectors against rodents. The Soviet era introduced initial ideological suspicion, yet the decisive role of cats during the Siege of Leningrad firmly established them in the hearts of the Russian population.

Today, Russia has one of the highest rates of cat ownership in the world, and cities like St. Petersburg celebrate cats as unofficial symbols. This enduring connection underscores the deep bond between Russians and their cats. The many historical events and anecdotes associated with cats reveal a relationship that has survived across centuries and remains an integral part of Russia's cultural heritage.





For your notes

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